

Focus | **HEALTH**

# Asthma assaults more U.S. lungs

Since 1980, nearly 18 million more people have gotten the disease.

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This has been Judy Filuta's life since she was 2: "I feel good, then, bang!" she says.

It happens suddenly. She can hardly breathe, and she gets nervous. Her throat tightens and she begins wheezing, and she gets even more nervous.

"It's a terrifying disease," says Filuta, 62, of Poestenkill, N.Y.

She's talking about asthma, and Americans have never breathed so uneasily.

Nationwide, 25 million people suffer from the respiratory disease, an increase of nearly 18 million since 1980.

May is Allergy and Asthma Awareness Month. As health professionals try to raise

## UCI researcher given grant to study asthma

Steven George, a biomedical engineer at the University of California, Irvine, has been awarded a \$1.5 million federal grant to study a molecule in the lungs believed to be associated with asthma attacks.

George, 38, will measure the amount of nitric oxide that human test subjects exhale to determine if there is a direct correlation between the amount of NO in the lungs and the severity of asthma

awareness of the chronic disease, researchers still don't understand it.

While it has become treatable, there is no cure. And researchers can still only theorize about the root cause of the disease, and the increase.

"There's no question that asthma is a health crisis," said Jocelyn Celestin, chief allergist and immunologist at Albany (N.Y.) Medical Center Hospital. Severe asthma disproportionately affects poor,

attacks. He is also trying to determine whether NO arises in two distinct areas of the lungs.

Such research could lead to more effective treatment of asthma, which affects 5 percent to 10 percent of the population in this country, George said.

"Asthma is a remarkably prevalent disease, and it has been increasing, which has been baffling to epidemiologists," George said Thursday.

minority, inner-city populations, particularly the poor in affluent societies.

The disease has become an unwelcome fact of life for 12 percent, or 9 million, American children.

City children's heavy exposure to environmental allergens and irritants is often cited as the likely culprit. But while air quality has been proved to trigger asthma attacks, researchers are quick to point out that air standards

in American cities haven't declined in a manner paralleling the overall increase in asthma.

One explanation is known as the "hygiene hypothesis," which holds that our obsessive pursuit of cleanliness has short-circuited our immune systems. Without the bacteria and viruses of old to fight, immune cells launch an attack on the respiratory system when otherwise harmless intruders such as dust mites enter.

The result is an inflammation of the lungs and a tightening of the airways. That is to say, asthma.

But the hypothesis falls short when trying to explain the rise in cases among inner-city children. Since they are likely being exposed in heavy doses to infectious agents, why haven't their immune systems beefed up in response?

Another theory links asthma with the increase in obesity and declining physical activity.

Another theory blames the



JAMES ESTRIN, THE NEW YORK TIMES

**FIGHTING BACK:** Regular medication helps Harlem resident Sadi Fofana, 7, control his asthma.

way buildings have been constructed in the last 30 years. To cut energy costs, homes have been built with little ventilation. Therefore, well-recognized asthma triggers such as pet dander, dust mites, cockroach droppings and tobacco smoke become more concentrated than in the past.

The news, however, is not all bad. With the use of inhalers and oral medications,

asthma attacks can be thwarted.

Filuta takes five milligrams daily of Prednisone, a steroid. She still has attacks, but hasn't required hospitalization in years.

"Very few were ever bothered by asthma when I was a child," she said. "I was the only one I knew with an inhaler, and now there's such a high percentage with it."